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ABSTRACT

School board presidents identified what they perceived to be critical incidents in their work with superintendents. The study was a sequel to previous research concerning superintendents' perceptions of critical incidents with school board members. Researchers conducted telephone interviews with 59 school board presidents and asked them to describe a critical incident with a superintendent, to explain the consequences, and to rate the importance of 12 critical incidents previously identified by superintendents. The interviews yielded 75 incidents which were grouped into the following 11 categories: communication and human relations, staffing issues, ethnics, competence, personal issues, finance, athletics, policy, credential, New Age Church, and board member. When rating the critical incidents identified by superintendents in the previous study, board presidents rated superintendents as the most problematic category. The paper discusses implications of the findings for: (1) colleges and universities that prepare administrators; (2) state and local professional associations that provide continuing education for superintendents; (3) administrators and school board members; and (4) state departments of education. Communication, public relations, interpersonal relations, and human relations were the dominant themes in these interviews. Therefore, these areas should be strengthened in preparation programs, continuing education, and certification. Education for board members is also needed. This paper contains 16 references. (KS)

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SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENTS DESCRIBE CRITICAL INCIDENTS WITH SUPERINTENDENTS

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SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENTS DESCRIBE CRITICAL INCIDENTS WITH SUPERINTENDENTS

This study is a sequel to previous research concerning superintendents' perceptions of critical incidents with school board members (Grady & Bryant, 1990). One of the recommendations that emerged from the study of superintendents was that a comparable study should be conducted with school board members as the subjects. This study is a response to that recommendation.

The literature that formed the context for this study focused on the tension between the school board and superintendent, governance and administration (Hunkins, 1949, Hosman, 1989). A major topic in education journals between 1980 and 1989 was the relationship between the school board and the superintendent (Ayalon, 1989; Cunningham & Hentges, 1982; Shannon, 1989; Tallerico, 1989; Trotter & Downey, 1989).

The purpose for conducting this study was to identify what school board presidents perceive to be critical incidents in their work with superintendents. For the study, school board presidents responded to the following:

1. Describe a critical incident you have experienced with a superintendent.
2. What were the consequences of the critical incident?
3. Rate the importance of the (12) categories of critical incidents previously identified by superintendents.

Insert Table 1 about here

Procedures

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to address the purpose of the study. All 275 school board presidents of K-12 school districts in Nebraska received a letter explaining the study. The board presidents responded to two questions: have you experienced a critical incident with a superintendent; and, would you be willing to discuss the incident? The researchers intentionally refrained from defining what was meant by critical incident in order to allow each responding school board president the freedom to determine what was and was not critical.

After two mailings and follow-up telephone calls, 239(87%) of the school board presidents responded. Of the respondents, 68(28%) experienced a critical incident and 171(72%) did not experience a critical incident. Of the school board presidents who experienced a critical incident, 60(88%) agreed to discuss the incidents.

Fifty-nine school board presidents(98%) were available for telephone interviews during Summer 1990. The school board presidents answered ten open-ended questions in sequence during interviews of 30-40 minutes in length. The 59 school board presidents described 75 incidents with superintendents.

Each researcher independently reviewed the transcripts of the interviews and identified the critical incidents. The researchers compared their findings to verify accurate identification and naming of the incidents. Independently, the researchers developed categories of incidents. The researchers then compared the categories and developed the final typology of incidents. The results are reported in the following section.

Results

The interviews provided a rich data base representing 75 incidents school board presidents experienced with superintendents. The incidents were grouped into 11 categories that appear in Table 2. The 11 categories and their frequencies

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Insert Table 2 about here

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were: communication/human relations, 28(37%); staffing issues, 11(15%); ethics, 8(11%); competence, 6(8%); personal issues, 5(7%); finance, 5(7%); athletics, 4(5%); policy, 3(4%); credentials, 3(4%); New Age Church, 1(1%); and board member, 1(1%). Each of these categories is described in the following sections.

Communication/Human Relations

The most frequently cited critical incidents concerned communication/human relations. Twenty-eight of the 75 incidents(37%) were in this category.

The school board presidents referred to these incidents as communications or human relations issues. The school board presidents described superintendents who were intimidating, reluctant to share information with the school board, publicly argumentative, and unwilling or unable to get along with people both in the schools and in the communities.

Instances of intimidation included a superintendent who's method of handling disagreements with people was "intimidation, he would yell at people." Another superintendent, described as strong willed, held a philosophy of "my way or no way" and used intimidation to achieve his objectives. One board president reported a superintendent who "more or less likes or tries to intimidate. We've lost some very qualified people who were paranoid about their positions because of him."

Examples of the withholding of information included the following. One school board president said: "People felt they did not get a clear answer from him." Another board president reported that "the whole system was kept from the school board members. They weren't aware of how or where the money was spent." Another incident included a superintendent who "withheld information, wouldn't answer questions, kept the board president in the dark."

The board presidents described displays of temper, yelling and shouting, and other forms of argumentative communication by superintendents. One board president reported: "He was mad that I confronted him. From that point on it was a constant battle.

He was fighting mad if I disagreed with him. That was how he handled people. This went on for four years until he finally resigned."

Another board president described the following incident.

> "This was a reaction to a statement I made at a board meeting. I think it had to do with a computer purchase. I made the comment offhandedly about one of these days having to close the school down because we'd end up computerized. He got outraged and flew off the handle. He said, 'if you sons of bitches don't want to go along with things' and on and on. I feel I was caught with my pants down. He was screaming and yelling . . . He gets upset when we voice opinions that are contrary to his. He takes things personally and thinks we're against him.

The school board presidents described superintendents who were unable to get along with others both in the schools and in the community. One board president referred to a superintendent "who didn't like to socialize or mingle with people. He had very little personality and didn't get involved in the community."

Another board president reported a general lack of communication. "He doesn't get out and work with staff to promote harmony. He stays apart from them, keeps his distance."

Another example included a superintendent who "basically had a problem with public relations. He seemed to have a little fire going with someone all the time. After awhile the staff got very irritable with him. They grew uncomfortable with him and resented him because he was on them all the time . . . . He had a problem communicating with the community. We have 275 students and 500 population in town. Everyone becomes friends. He didn't get along with people. He had a gruff way about him."

Another board president described a superintendent who's "relationships with the teachers and other faculty became almost adversarial. He didn't support them. He was anti-teacher in his talks and whenever he'd bring issues to the board he spoke negatively about teachers. The morale was so poor and relationships with teachers were so bad we decided we needed to let him go."

Fourteen of the 28 incidents(50%) described as communications/human relations problems resulted in the resignations or terminations of the superintendents. The incidents described by the board presidents in this category were not discrete, well-defined situations. Instead the incidents were more complex and reflected the cumulative effect of long-term poor communication and human relations skills.

Staffing Issues

The second category of incidents concerned staffing issues and included 11 of the 75 incidents(15%). The school board presidents described instances of superintendents' personnel recommendations not being supported. In four incidents the superintendents attempted to terminate teachers without the support of the school board. None of the four teachers were terminated.

In one incident the superintendent wanted to select three activities directors for the schools. The board authorized only two. The board president described the superintendent's current

behavior as both immature and vindictive because of the board's failure to support the staffing recommendation.

In three incidents, superintendents ignored the directives of the school board in hiring selections. One superintendent attempted to hire a very experienced teacher who was his friend, rather than two inexperienced teachers as requested by the board. The teacher was not hired and the superintendent resigned because of the incident. Another superintendent offered a coaching contract to a newly hired teacher without the approval of the school board. The coaching contract was withheld.

Two school board presidents described superintendents who were lax in their supervision of staff. One superintendent failed to terminate an athletic coach in spite of a board directive to do so. Another superintendent was told to supervise a principal more closely to improve his performance. In each of these instances, the superintendents were described as lazy.

A final incident in this category occurred when a staff member was told to catheterize and diaper a special education student. The staff member protested against the assignment. The incident emerged without board awareness. The school board president described the situation as being particularly difficult because the district became involved in a grievance procedure.

Ethics

Eight incidents(11%) formed a third category labeled ethics. The school board presidents identified incidents as ethical issues ranging from "covering up mistakes" to removing $700 from

a cash drawer. Two board presidents described incidents that emerged when superintendents did not report mistakes or errors to the school board. One superintendent used a school vehicle and school equipment for personal use, even though specifically directed not to do so by the school board. This same individual planted one of the trees specially purchased for the school grounds on his property.

One superintendent, with the help of his secretary, advanced his own salary for several months before the situation came to the school board's attention. The superintendent eventually declared bankruptcy.

A superintendent's wife dipped into a drawer that contained money collected for gymnasium use. When the missing $700 was discovered, the superintendent was blamed. The superintendent resigned because of the incident.

One superintendent backed out of a contract two days after he was hired. Only when the school board contacted the individual was this breach of the contract reported.

Another superintendent falsified reports to the department of education. An inquiring parent seeking testing data discovered the discrepancy.

Five of the 8 incidents described by the school board presidents as ethical issues resulted in superintendent resignations.

Competence

Six incidents(8%) formed a fourth category labeled competence. Five of the incidents described by the school board presidents concerned superintendents who did not have "basic understanding" of the work of the superintendent. The board presidents noted that these superintendents did not know enough about their work to ask for help. Symptoms of lack of competence for the position became apparent when reports were not submitted by deadlines, when the financial status of the school district was misrepresented, or when staff evaluations were not conducted in the districts. Four resignations resulted from these incidents.

One superintendent who was too sick to accomplish the work of the district was forced to resign. The incident was particularly difficult because the superintendent had been employed in the district for 28 years. According to the school board president, "the superintendent was not aware of his incapacity." The school board president noted that the incident became critical when "we realized he hadn't been doing any of the work."

Personal Issues (Life in the Public Eye)

Five incidents(7%) concerned personal issues. Of these, three involved the use of alcohol and two involved extra-marital affairs. In one incident, the superintendent of a school district left a professional meeting intoxicated. The

superintendent struck a parked car but fled the scene of the accident. The incident was reported in the press.

Another school board president described a new superintendent who was unable to report to work because of his alcoholism problem. After two months, the superintendent voluntarily resigned because he was unable to work.

A third board president described a superintendent noted for his public drunkenness as well as his drunkenness on the job. The school board president stated: "He's been on the job too long (20 years). He'll never leave. The board will never fire him as long as he's friends with three."

One superintendent's car was at school; but, the superintendent did not appear for work. In the late morning, the secretary became concerned. She notified the school board president. "When the superintendent showed up in the evening he was quite upset that we'd been concerned." Both the superintendent and the school staff member involved in the affair with this married superintendent resigned.

In a similar incident, the superintendent was having an affair with his secretary. The school board president said: "It was pretty obvious that it was occurring...I made the decision to handle this discretely. My approach to the board was that it was time for a change in superintendents but I did not reveal information about the affair to them. The board agreed. From there I talked with the man and confronted him. He was very

concerned about how this would affect his marriage. He ended up deciding to resign."

Finance

The fifth category included 5(7%) incidents related to finance issues. One school board president reported that the superintendent did not understand the financial affairs of the district. The situation became particularly apparent during the month in which the bills for the district totaled $40,000 more than was available.

In another incident, four members of the school board proceeded to negotiate the purchase of a building without the knowledge of the superintendent or the other members of the board. Although the purchase of the building was not completed, the superintendent resigned because of the incident.

An eight million dollar bond issue failed by 42 votes in one school district. According to the school board president, this incident was critical for the school district because the school enrollments had increased 25-30%. Another incident concerning spending and taxation resulted in a recall election. Four board members, described by the board president as members of the John Birch Society, were recalled because of their views on cutting taxes and reducing spending.

A school board president described a complex incident that occurred when a superintendent did not understand the budgeting process. According to the report, the superintendent permitted funds to be combined. Ultimately, this resulted in the

withholding of $300,000 in federal funds. After an audit and a new superintendent the financial affairs of the district were restored to order after ten months.

Athletics

Four incidents(5%) involved athletics. One incident emerged when a plan to develop cooperative athletic programs with another school district fueled a community controversy. One community member distributed inaccurate information concerning the cooperative venture throughout the district. The school board president noted the power of an individual on issues such as athletics. Ultimately, the cooperative program did not succeed.

Another school board president described a superintendent who was passive in the area of evaluations. In this incident, an athletic coach was the subject of controversy. The coach used profanity and was "a poor role model as the coach of a girls' athletic team." The superintendent was directed to terminate the coach.

One board president described a critical incident involving a superintendent who chose to retain a coach rather than hire a math/computer science teacher. The board president did not agree with the superintendent's priorities. The board president noted that academics should be given priority.

Another incident involving athletics emerged when a superintendent did not control spending by the coaches. The situation became extreme. The school board president noted: "The bill got so bad that a couple of sporting goods companies

called board members to find out why bills weren't being paid. The superintendent hated to admit he didn't have control over the coaching staff."

Credentials

Three incidents(4%) concerned superintendents' credentials. In each of these three incidents, the school board president noted that the superintendent's credentials were not thoroughly reviewed prior to employment. One superintendent could not handle the "basic management." The school board president said "the board that hired him should have checked him closer, though he was hiding things." The superintendent did not have administrative certification. The superintendent resigned in mid-year.

One school board president described terminating a superintendent who was using his position for his personal benefit. The superintendent was described as incapable of performing the job. The school board president noted: "the main problem was our board's fault--we didn't check that man out. We didn't spend enough time hiring him and we got burned. Plus he didn't have the kind of skills he needed to be a superintendent."

Another board president described the process of terminating a superintendent within the first year of his superintendency. The school board president said: "We didn't check him out as well as we should have. We did make 1-2 phone calls to former school districts but they didn't give us any indication they had let him go."

Policy

Three incidents(4%) concerned policy issues. In two incidents, superintendents chose to support decisions made by building principals rather than support the school district policies. In one incident, a board policy provided for the selection of a valedictorian and salutatorian. When the principal and superintendent selected two valedictorians and no salutatorian, the board members cited the school district policy. The school board president said: "He didn't listen to the board. He sided with the principal and guidance counselor. He forgot who his employer was." Eventually the principal resigned his position.

In another incident, a principal brought in a family services group to make a presentation to the students. The board expected to be notified of the presentation time by the superintendent. The principal held the presentation while the superintendent was away from the district. The school board president noted that the principal "was trying to pull one over on everyone including the superintendent." In the end, the superintendent supported the principal.

Another incident involved the school district nepotism policy. When a new superintendent accepted his position, he asked for a job for his wife. The school district's nepotism policy prevented employment of his wife. The superintendent

continued to besiege the school board for a job for his wife. The school board upheld the policy. The superintendent resigned.

New Age Church

One incident(1%) concerned the activities of the minister of a local new age church group. Led by the minister, the group forced the superintendent's resignation, citing the existence of satanism in the schools as the key issue. One school board member belonged to the group. The school board president noted, though, that "the preacher instigated it."

Board Member

One incident(1%) occurred when an individual board member made accusations against the superintendent. Although the board president said the accusations were false, eventually after three months the superintendent resigned. The board president noted that "I don't know why this particular board member had something against the superintendent. It's still confusing."

Consequences

In addition to the identification of critical incidents, the investigators inquired about school board presidents' perceptions of the consequences of these incidents. When asked what the consequences of the critical incidents were, the school board presidents identified both tangible and intangible consequences. As a tangible consequence, the school board presidents described superintendents' resignations and terminations. Of the 75 incidents the school board presidents reported, 40(54%) incidents resulted in superintendent resignations or terminations.

As an intangible consequence, the school board presidents described the negative aura that pervaded staff relationships and the school districts after the incidents. The board presidents also reported distrust and suspicion as consequences of the incidents.

Superintendents' Critical Incidents

The board presidents were asked to rate the 12 categories of critical incidents identified by superintendents in a previous study. In the previous study, superintendents described critical incidents they had experienced in their work with school boards and school board members. Eighty superintendents reported 151 incidents. The 151 incidents were classified into the following 12 categories: incidents involving board members' family and friends 36(24%), board members' roles 27(18%), who's elected to the board 17(11%), superintendent not supported 15(10%), board malfunctions 14(9%), athletic coaches 10(7%), community 8(5%), individual board members 8(5%), employee 6(4%), contracts 6(4%), superintendent 3(2%), and finances 1(1%). (See Grady & Bryant, 1990 for a full description of the categories.)

The board presidents rated the 12 categories of incidents using a scale of 1-7, with 1 indicating least problematic and 7 indicating most problematic. Table 3 includes the mean rating for each category of critical incident.

Insert Table 3 about here

Of the 12 categories of incidents, the school board presidents rated superintendents(5.90) as most problematic. In descending order from most to least problematic, the ratings were: superintendent not supported(5.32); board members' roles(4.98); board malfunctions(4.76); who's elected to the board(4.53); board members' family and friends(4.47); community(4.24); finance(4.24); individual board members(4.20); athletic coaches(4.17); employee problems(3.95); and, contract(3.80).

Implications

The findings of this study have implications for the field of educational administration generally, and specifically for the following: colleges and universities that prepare administrators; state and local professional associations; administrators and school board members; and state departments of education.

Colleges and Universities

Colleges and universities should review these findings in relation to the curriculum offered to future administrators. These school board presidents did not report incidents concerning academic or curriculum issues, nor were the issues related to business affairs, legal issues, or legislative issues. Only five incidents were related to finance.

Communication, public relations, interpersonal relations, and human relations were the dominant themes in these reports. Because of the dominance of these issues, a substantial portion of the preparation experiences for would-be superintendents

should be focused on helping individuals improve their public relations, interpersonal relations, and human relations skills. Emphasis on communication skills, both verbal and nonverbal, should be part of this preparation.

Preparation programs should include conflict resolution skills so that superintendents are able to resolve some of the incidents described in this report. Superintendents should have the skills to handle conflict. Superintendents' preparation should include coursework in assessing community power structures. A number of these incidents arose because superintendents did not understand the power bases in the communities. Superintendent preparation should include experience in developing a vision and goals for the superintendent's role and for school districts. Many of the reported incidents were not related to the education of children. Superintendents who articulate a vision and clear goals for the education of children may be able to defuse incidents not related to the vision and goals of a school district.

Superintendents need to recognize situations that may lead to superintendent turnover. In this study, superintendent turnovers occurred because of the critical incidents. Identifying the causes of superintendent turnover and developing skills in handling similar situations should be considerations in preparation experiences. The literature on school administration needs to reflect the incidence and causes of superintendent turnover. Superintendent turnover is a typical occurrence

precipitated by a complex set of factors related to individuals, governance, and community structure.

Superintendents need to work in settings in which job descriptions, role expectations, and evaluation procedures are clearly established as part of district policies. A number of these incidents may have been avoided if expectations had been clearly specified. Preparation programs for superintendents should include opportunities to review job descriptions and evaluation procedures used by superintendents and school boards to assure that district operations function smoothly. Similarly, superintendents should have an understanding of the role of the school board.

Professional Associations

Professional associations have the opportunity to offer workshops that reflect the contemporary needs of their membership. Once superintendents leave their university preparation programs, they rely on professional associations to assist them in meeting their educational needs. Superintendents may look to their administrator associations for their continuing professional education. Administrator organizations may need to provide opportunities for superintendents to develop their interpersonal, communication, conflict resolution, and community assessment skills. Similarly, the associations might assist superintendents in the development of job descriptions, evaluation procedures and job expectations. The professional

associations could also report the incidence of superintendent turnover in the state and region.

Based on the findings of this study, school board members would benefit from preparation experiences for their roles as board members. Board members may need a clearer understanding of their roles and responsibilities. Responsibility for providing preparation for board membership may be unclear. Ideally, individuals running for election to a school board should be required to have an introductory preparation experience for board membership. After election, newly seated board members should be required to attend additional preparation sessions. Annually members of boards should attend workshops designed to emphasize board member roles and responsibilities. Education of board members may require state legislation to mandate such requirements. Providers of the education could be state departments of education, regional service units, school board associations or universities.

Who provides the education for board members is a critical issue. Since affiliation with a state school board association is voluntary, the responsibility for providing this education may rest with a state department of education since its outreach extends to all schools in a state. Ultimately, the education of board members should focus on the policy making function of the board of education.

Departments of Education

The findings of this study may have implications for departments of education. State certification requirements for superintendents may need to focus more clearly on interpersonal skills, communication skills, and conflict resolution skills. The incidents reported by these board presidents reflect the importance of good human relations skills.

The findings of this study may have implications for superintendents, university preparation programs, professional associations and state departments of education in other states as they attempt to provide the best preparation experiences for future administrators, best continuing education for current superintendents, best inservice for school boards, and best direction and leadership from professional associations and departments of education.

Table 1

Critical Incidents Identified by Superintendents

1. Board Members' Family and Friends
2. Board Members' Roles
3. Who's Elected to the Board
4. Superintendent not Supported
5. Board Malfunctions
6. Athletic Coaches
7. Community
8. Individual Board Members
9. Employee Problem
10. Contract
11. Superintendent
12. Finance

Table 2

School Board Presidents Describe Critical Incidents with Superintendents

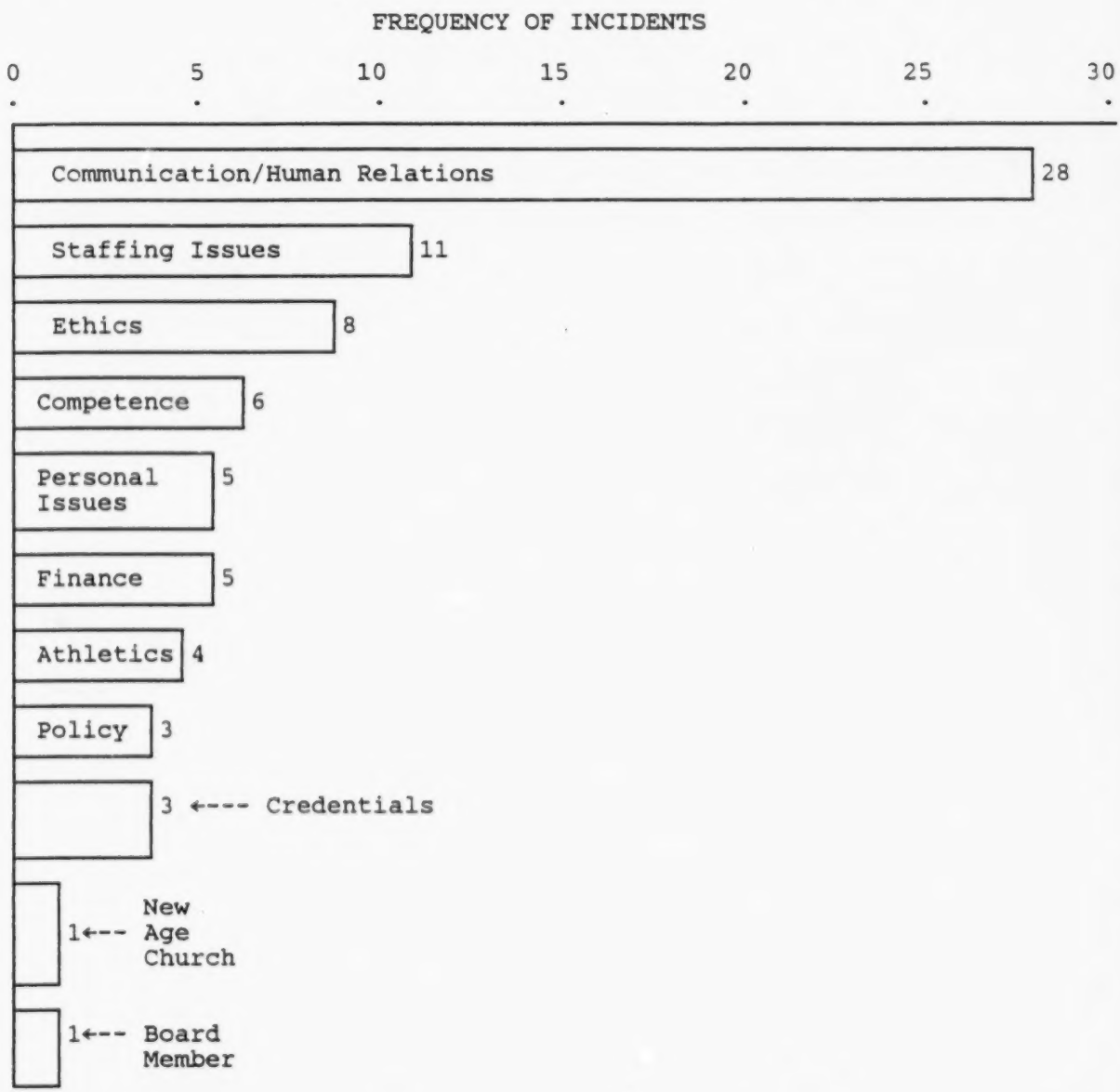

Table 3

School Board Presidents' Response to Critical Incidents Identified by Superintendents

Means	Superintendents' Critical Incidents	Least Problematic 1	2	3	4	5	6	Most Problematic 7
(4.47)	Board Members' Family and Friends	----------	----------	----------	----------	----------	----------	→
(4.98)	Board Members' Roles	----------	----------	----------	----------	----------	----------	→
(4.53)	Who's Elected to the Board	----------	----------	----------	----------	----------	----------	→
(5.32)	Superintendent Not Supported	----------	----------	----------	----------	----------	----------	→
(4.76)	Board Malfunctions	----------	----------	----------	----------	----------	----------	→
(4.17)	Athletic Coaches	----------	----------	----------	----------	----------	→	
(4.24)	Community	----------	----------	----------	----------	----------	→	
(4.20)	Individual Board Members	----------	----------	----------	----------	----------	→	
(3.95)	Employee Problems	----------	----------	----------	----------	→		
(3.80)	Contract	----------	----------	----------	----------	→		
(5.90)	Superintendent	----------	----------	----------	----------	----------	----------	→
(4.24)	Finance	----------	----------	----------	----------	----------	→	

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